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SHALLOW WATER GROUPEE

Struggling against the forcefully bent rod, breathing heavily while fighting whatever is pulling from the depths below and straining for the chance at victory offers Florida anglers an exhilarating challenge year after year. Eager fishermen venture out for the thrill of the hunt, armed with the best methods and equipment they can muster. Scouring the areas where their targeted prey can be found, they share a common goal when on this mission: Pulling up a fat, whopping grouper to bring into the boat or home to the table.



Shallow water grouper fishing is excellent up and down both coasts of Florida. This sport takes some knowledge to get it right, but once the techniques are learned, grouper fishing can prove to be very fruitful. Fresh grouper is a staple in the seafood diet of most Floridians. Even if one doesn't enjoy eating this delicious fish, fighting them is always a treat!

Most of the shallow water grouper found in Florida are Gags, but once in a while you'll pull up an occasional Red or Black grouper. From land, grouper can be found around bridges, barge canals and docks. These are the places to fish for grouper because they congregate next to permanent areas of shelter. When on a boat, looking for structure on a fish finder can be helpful when trying to find the spots where grouper are hiding. Structures such as reefs and wrecks overflow with threadfins, sardines and smaller reef fish. Grouper live in and around these structures, not only for protection, but also for the bountiful supply of food. It's nice that Florida grouper can be caught from land and also by boat. This makes grouper fishing even more enticing for any kind of last minute fishing trip!

The best water temperatures to catch grouper in range from the mid 60-80 degrees Fahrenheit. The fish prefer this temperature range, making Florida a prime location for catching them year round, however, the most favorable water temperatures for shallow water grouper fishing occur during spring and fall in most areas of the state. In the winter, the water is colder which makes them lethargic. During the summer, the water temperatures are hotter, which slows them down as well. Grouper move out to deeper water to find more favorable water temperatures during winter and summer, making them harder to find when fishing in shallow water.

Two of the most common methods for catching shallow water grouper are trolling and jigging. Trolling involves fishermen slowly driving their boat over the area where the fish

are while dragging their lures behind the boat. In this case, artificial bait is usually best and anglers use species-specific lures in order to attract grouper. When trolling, the grouper will see the lure, come up from the structure they are hanging around, and inhale the lure.

Trolling for grouper is great because it eliminates much of the risk of the fish swimming back underneath the rocks, reef or wreck. Trolling covers a lot of territory, and if you don't know exactly where the grouper are, it's a great way to locate the fish as well as look for new spots. The Yo-Zuri deep diving Crystal Minnow is a great lure to use. These lures dive about fifteen to twenty feet, so a good depth of water to troll is between fifteen and thirty feet over shallow rocks, wrecks, reefs, or potholes. The nice thing about these types of lures is that they look a lot like Spanish sardines, speedos, or threadfins that hang around wrecks.

Anglers generally use conventional tackle with a heavier grouper rod when trolling. Most people use 50 to 60 pound

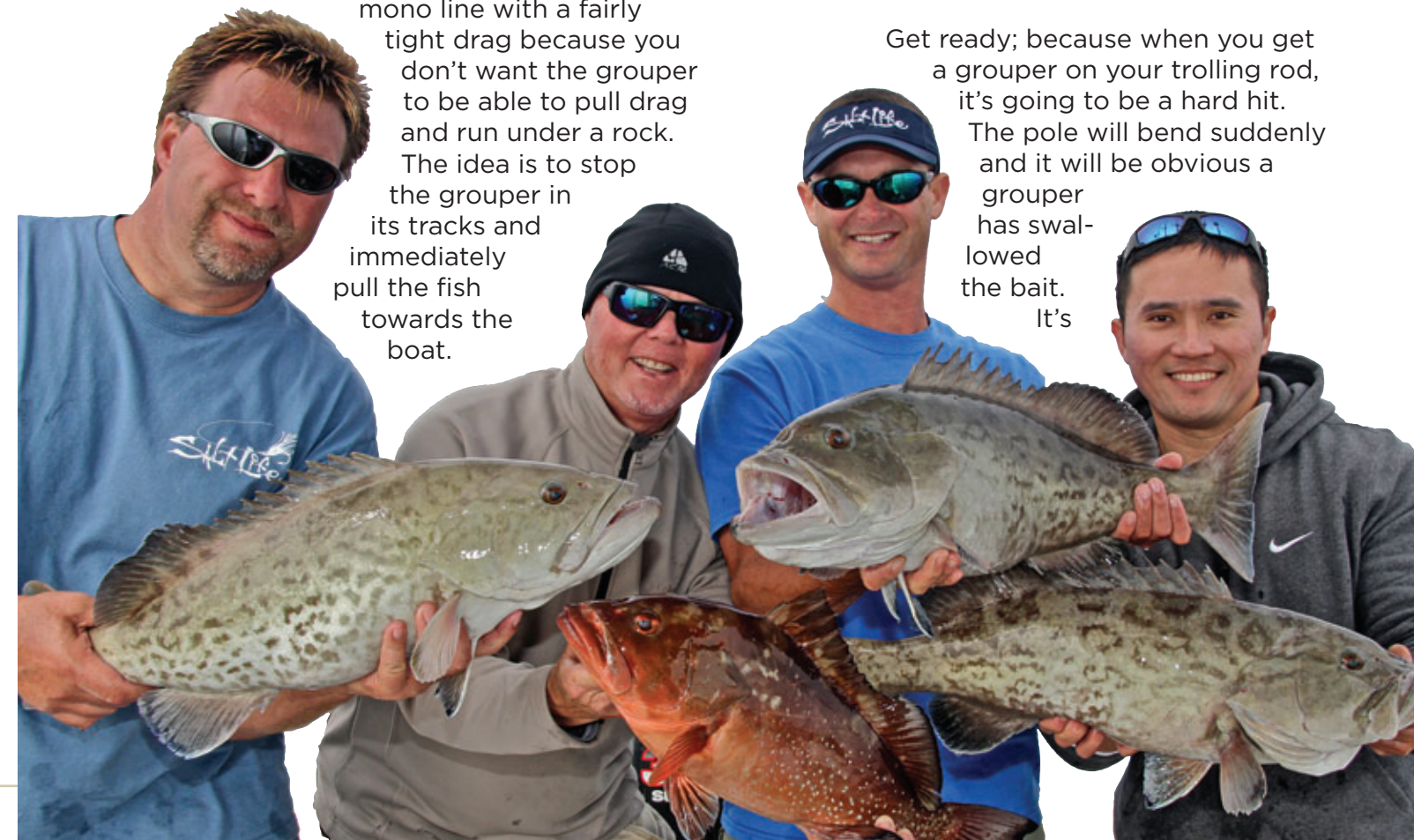
mono line with a fairly tight drag because you don't want the grouper to be able to pull drag and run under a rock. The idea is to stop the grouper in its tracks and immediately pull the fish towards the boat.



If you give a grouper ten feet of line, you've generally lost your fish.

When trolling, one can imagine the grouper popping up from its rocky hole to attack the bait and then being yanked forward. All of this hopefully happens before the grouper gets a chance to swim back down and break the line on the rocks. Trolling is a marvelous technique. Once an angler gets to know the way grouper behave, it becomes easier to figure out how to catch them.

Get ready; because when you get a grouper on your trolling rod, it's going to be a hard hit. The pole will bend suddenly and it will be obvious a grouper has swallowed the bait. It's



not always necessary to take the pole out of the rod holder when you start reeling. Cranking as soon as the fish hits the line can be effective as well. Pull the rod out once you get the grouper closer to the boat. At this point, it's best to have a Cush-It ready to slip onto the rod butt so it doesn't dig into your hip during the fight.

While trolling for shallow water grouper, you may run into Kingfish, Spanish Mackerel and Cobia. These are all fantastic by-catches. I always love to fill my Grizzly cooler with as many fish as possible. Once you've found grouper while trolling, it's not a bad idea to kill the engine and start jigging because there are likely to be other fish congregating nearby. It's helpful to mark these spots on your bottom machine, so you can come back and fish them later.

Jigging is a great way to specifically target grouper after locating them by trolling. Jigging is a method used when the boat is anchored or drifting with the engines off. To jig, anglers simply drop their lines down and bounce the lure upward from the bottom, hoping to get a bite. After dropping the line beside the boat, it's important to let the jig sink all the way to the bottom. Sometimes, it can be tricky to know when to close the bail, so it's necessary to feel the bait hit bottom and see slack in your line. Drop a bucktail jig or a Tsunami Holographic Swim Bait to trigger the bite you're after. Grouper will see the bait near the bottom and pop out of the rocks in order to snatch a meal. It's good to use baits with holographic components because they reflect light coming from the surface, better illuminating the lure for the bottom-dwelling grouper.



To the grouper, the jig looks like a crab or shrimp or baitfish shooting up from the bottom and fluttering back down to the floor. Grouper also can hear this activity and see the puff of sand each time the bait is jigged from the bottom. Besides jigging with lures, live or natural bait is something that will work on grouper if they seem to be a little stubborn on the artificial bait. Once you find a spot with grouper, work this area strongly before trolling over another area to find more fish.

Jigging for grouper is best on 65 or 80 pound braid with a 60 or 80lb Yo-Zuri power carbon leader. The reason that your line and leader needs to be so heavy is because you're usually fishing around rocks, reefs, wrecks or ledges. The drag should be pretty tight while jigging, just as when trolling for grouper. It's always important to keep reeling once the hook is set because grouper will quickly swim back under the rocks and snap the line. Grouper fight hard, and it's always a struggle to keep your rod up while excitedly reeling in!

Sometimes, if a grouper swims under the rocks, anglers wait until the fish loosens itself before resuming the fight. This is when you may get a lucky second chance to pull him up from the rocks and into the boat! Grouper fishing is completely different than fighting a fish in the open water. You can afford to have a looser drag when fighting a pelagic in blue water or fishing on the flats, because there isn't much structure to cut your line.

Jigging and trolling are two of the oldest techniques for catching grouper with lures. These methods have been tried and true for decades, and it's best to trust the solid advice of Florida fishermen that's been years in the making. Essentially, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Jigs and trolling lures are very effective for catching grouper, just like gold spoons are great for catching redfish.

Currently, there is an overabundance of Gag grouper on the west coast of Florida. With the long closures on the legal fishing season,



grouper are starting to overpopulate most gulf areas. This rapid increase in population has made catching Gag grouper much easier for Florida anglers. With the current season opening up again, Gag grouper are a much-awaited target for many Florida anglers.

Shallow water grouper fishing has become a favorite pastime for many Florida fishermen. These fish are a long sought-after delicacy and they make a delightful dinner when freshly prepared. Targeting grouper is very easy if you know the right techniques, and it's not hard to find them if you know where to look. The thrill of a solid hit slamming the rod, gut-busting battles on top of rocky structures and skillful execution of time-tested methods keeps grouper fishing in Florida booming all year round. 🎣